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ABSTRACT

Students must make decisions about their lifestyle, future careers, academic pursuits, and classroom and school issues. Learning to make effective decisions for themselves and for society is an important aspect of competence. They can learn decision making through interacting and solving problems with others. A central ingredient for successful group decision making is constructive controversy. Students should express their opposing views openly, explore other opinions, understand different perspectives, and integrate ideas and information into high quality, accepted solutions. To make controversy constructive, they should realize that they have strongly positive-linked goals; convey acceptance of the other as a person; influence and be open to being influenced rather than dominate and control each other; and, view the problem as a challenge to solve rather than feel the stress of a crisis or the apathy of underestimation. These results emphasize the importance of having students practice their constructive controversy skills by participating in classroom and school decision making. (Author)

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Learning to Make Decisions Through Constructive Controversy

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ABSTRACT

Students must make decisions about their lifestyle, future careers, academic pursuits, and classroom and school issues. Learning to make effective decisions for themselves and for society is an important aspect of competence. They can learn decision making through interacting and make solving problems with others. A central ingredient for successful group decision making is constructive controversy. Students should express their opposing views openly, explore other opinions, understand different perspectives, and intergrate ideas and information into high quality, accepted solutions. To make controversy constructive, they should realize that they have strongly positive-linked goals, convey acceptance of the other as a person, influence and be open to being influenced rather than dominate and control each other, and view the problem as a challenge to solve rather than feel the stress of a crisis or the apathy of underestimation. These results emphasize the importance of having students practice their constructive controversy skills by participating in classroom and school decision making.

Learning to Make Decisions Through Constructive Controversy

Students continually identify problems and make decisions. These decisions range from the mundane to the significant, from the personal to the organizational. They make decisions about friends, drugs, life-styles, athletics, and a course of study. Educators convinced of the importance of student participation in decision making (Richter & Tjosvold, 1980) invite them to express their opinions on course topics, classroom discipline, and school organization. Making decisions is a major aspect of competence. Students must be able to make effective decisions if they are to use their resources wisely for themselves and society and to feel powerful and in control of their life. Although decision making is often thought to be done by individuals working alone, seldom do people make important decisions alone. They consult with others or form a group to make significant decisions. Choosing to smoke, a career, or a college typically involve interaction with friends, parents, and educators. Students learning to make decisions in groups is also important for their careers and membership in work organizations. Groups have been observed to make most of the significant decisions in all kinds of organizations.

Consulting with others and making decisions in groups have several advantages. Persons realize that their own biases and blind spots limit their perspective and leave them unsure about the best alternative. Others provide new information, correct errors of judgment, stimulate new ways of looking at the problems, and offer opportunities to combine ideas.

Group decision making has interpersonal and emotional rewards as well. Through groups, persons express feelings, share excitement and frustrations, understand each other, and form relationships. They find support, share risks, and feel more confident about their direction. However, groups can be awful. Janis' (1972) work on groupthink dramatically captures the image of groups as conforming and ineffective. Groups can stifle opinions and crush creativity.

The theme of this paper is that constructive controversy is the key to unlock the potential of group decision making and that students must learn controversy skills to be effective decision makers. Controversy occurs when one person's ideas, opinions, conclusions, theories, and information are incompatible with another's. Decision makers disagree as they outline alternatives, select their choice, and implement their solution. Persons disagree through decision making and try to reach an agreement so that they can move into the next phase of making the decision. Controversy is inevitable. Students will disagree with teachers and teachers with administrators on how the school's resources should be allocated. Students and teachers debate the advantages and disadvantages of smoking. Parents and students have opposing views of the appropriate career path. The research this paper reports addresses the issue of how groups can profit from the discussion of opposing opinions as they make decisions.

Research Findings

Research in developmental psychology and group decision making have demonstrated the value of controversy. Piaget (1948) and Kohlberg (1969) proposed that through controversy persons come to understand another's reasoning, compare it with their own, and develop more adequate reasoning. Considerable research has found that children in controversy with others develop more sophisticated ways of thinking. Maier (1970) and his colleagues have conducted a series of studies that suggests controversy improves decision making. Groups composed of different kins of persons and groups whose leaders encourage minority opinions were found to make quality decisions. These studies highlight the potential of controversy, but research is needed to understand the dynamics of controversy and to identify the conditions under which controversy contributes to decision making.

For several years I, along with Dave Johnson from the University of Minnesota, and now my colleagues at Simon Fraser University, have empirically developed knowledge on the dynamics and conditions of controversy. Eight experiments have been published, and several more are being written or reviewed, and more data ar being collected. Studies have used moral issues and simulations of business decisions and several different operations of the independent and dependent variables. Undergraduate students in education and business administration and experienced managers from two countries have served as research participants. Results seem quite robust and hold under this variety of operations and sample

populations. Our knowledge seems cumulative and, as I hope to show you, important theoretically and practically.

We drew upon Berlyne (1963) as well as others to construct a model of the dynamics of controversy. Berlyne proposed that when faced with the unexpected or incongruous persons would, under certain conditions, feel aroused and use this interest and energy to explore and try to understand the unusual. We placed these ideas in an interpersonal context. Persons in controversy may feel uncertainty about whether their ideas or the other's ideas are more adequate, try to explore and understand that person's ideas, and, to the extent that these ideas are useful, incorporate them into their own thinking and develop more adequate decisions and conclusions.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Results of the studies [illegible]ly support the model. (Readers are asked to look at the original studies for description of the operations and specific findings.) Persons who faced controversy directly were found to be less certain their own position was correct, asked more questions of the other to understand the opposing opinion, demonstrated more actual knowledge of the opposing arguments and the type of reasoning their opponent used in the discussion. Controversy's impact on exploration and

understanding generally held under the various kinds of controversy investigated. The kind of controversy affected the extent persons were open-minded to the other person and his position, and were willing to incorporate it into their own thinking and decision making. The conditions of controversy also affected their feelings and interpersonal relationships.

Social Context

Deutsch (1973) proposed that the dynamics of conflict depend on whether participants believe their goals are cooperatively (positively) or competitively (negatively) linked. Several of our studies support this reasoning (Tjosvold, 1982; Tjosvold & Deemer, 1980; Tjosvold & Johnson, 1977, 1978; Van Berklom & Tjosvold, 1981). Participants in the competitive conflict in which they felt they should try to win and outdo each other showed interest and understanding of the other's position, but also demonstrated closemindedness to the other's position and as well as negativism toward the other as a person. Competitive controversy decision makers, for example, failed to reach agreement (Tjosvold & Deemer, 1980). Managers in a competitive controversy were found to understand but not to use the subordinate's information and ideas when they made their decisions (Tjosvold, 1982a). Decision makers in a cooperative controversy, on the other hand, incorporated the other's ideas whether they made the decisions together or made the decision independently. Persons were more positive toward each other in cooperative than in competitive controversy.

Acceptance

Bargainers have been found to become intransigence and fail to compromise toward the other's position when they felt they have lost face by looking foolish and weak (Tjosvold, 1974). Persons in controversy who were not accepted as strong and competent were found to understand the opposing position but to be closeminded toward it and to reject the other person (Tjosvold, Johnson, & Fabrey, 1980; Tjosvold, Johnson, & Lerner, 1981). Disagreeing and feeling accepted by the other led to interest, understanding, and openness to the other person and position.

Collaborative

The attempt to control has been found to induce resistance to compromise in bargaining (Tjosvold, 1979). Managers who were expected to control the subordinates were found not to understand or incorporate the subordinate's views into their decision when the subordinate was deferent. When the subordinate also wanted to control, the control-oriented managers understood the opposing opinion but did not use it in their decision. A orientation toward give-and-take influence was found to aid constructive controversy (Tjosvold, 1981).

Challenge

Decision makers under crises are thought to search frantically for a way out, fail to explore alternatives, and seek premature closure. However, little pressure may not create the incentives to canvass alter-

natives thoroughly (Mann & Janis, 1983). Managers who thought the problem was a challenge, rather than a crisis or a minor issue, appeared to approach the controversy with a subordinate successfully. They understood the position and incorporated specific information to make a decision useful for the management and subordinates (Tjosvold, in press).

Future Research

Research is needed and continues to develop and extend our knowledge on the dynamics and conditions of constructive controversy. Different operations and samples can increase confidence. Especially needed are field questionnaire studies and experiments that builds confidence in the generalizability of the findings. A field study just now being completed involving practising managers and actual organizational decisions indicate that constructive controversy accounted for 45% of the variance on successful decision making. Research has built a foundation; more effort, perspectives, and constructive controversy are needed to develop the area.

Implications

Fred Richter and I (1980) empirically demonstrated the value of student involvement in classroom decision making. Students from 14 elementary classrooms from two schools were randomly assigned to participate in making decisions on classroom study topics or have the teacher unilaterally give the same assignment to them. Students in the participation condition were observed in the five week experiment to be more

responsible and internally motivated on the classroom assignments, to interact more supportively with their peers, to develop more positive attitudes toward school, and to demonstrate more achievement and learning than were students who were just told what the assignments would be.

Research reported here underline the value of student participation in school decision making. [illegible] involvement makes it more likely that a variety of opinions will be brought to bear and the discussion will yield high quality decisions persons accept and are willing to implement. Students' involvement is a practical place for them to learn to use constructive controversy skills that are important for them to make their present decisions and to become productive members of work organizations.

Teachers and administrators should structure decision making sessions to stimulate controversy and make it constructive. They should be wary of premature agreement and protect minority opinions and encourage people to speak out. Individuals can be assigned to defend opposing opinions and perspectives. Just as diligently, educators should structure the controversy so that its benefits are realized. Students and others should realize that they have a common goal and are positively interdependent. Feeling known and respected helps them feel cooperatively linked and respond to each other's ideas rather than attempt to counterattack and make each other look foolish. The atmosphere should be one of give and take without the leader or members feeling they must control. Constructive controversy is open but persons just are not to let themselves go. They must remember they are working for the common good, not trying

to win, and that they should discuss their differences so that persons feel personally accepted and encouraged to speak their own opinions.

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Figure 1

Dynamics of Constructive Controversy